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ABSTRACT

Between January and April 2000, Mount Royal College in Calgary, Alberta, Canada piloted an anonymous online faculty-administered teaching assessment tool. Five instructors volunteered to participate, and 5 students from classes taught by each instructor joined them in focus groups, for a total of 30 focus group participants. The quantitative and qualitative results from the pilot are discussed and used to determine what influence, if any, the tool had on the teaching and learning environment. Preliminary findings suggest that the software was valuable from both student and faculty perspectives. (Contains 2 tables and 17 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Anonymous Online Teaching Assessments: Preliminary Findings[1]

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Abstract

Between January and April 2000, Mount Royal College in Calgary, Alberta piloted an anonymous online faculty-administered teaching assessment tool. The quantitative and qualitative results from the pilot are discussed and used to determine what influence, if any, the tool had on the teaching and learning environment. Preliminary findings suggest that the software was valuable from both student and faculty perspectives.

Introduction

Teaching appraisals are like a compass on a ship: without one, no one has a sense of direction--all hands are lost. A student's assessment of a teacher is always subjective, at times unfair, and, possibly, stressful, but it is one of the few instruments to indicate if we are about to sail off the edge of the world or discover a new continent.

Traditionally, teaching appraisals are conducted at the end of term. However, this prevents students from offering constructive feedback *while they are still in the course*. Waiting until the end of the term indicates that student input is valued only after a course is over, which implies that it is not valued at all. Conducting ongoing teaching assessments, on the other hand, opens a proactive dialogue with students about teaching, the course, and the learning process.

The ongoing assessment of a course and/or the teacher is a critical and fundamental component of the learning process. In the following paper, I comment briefly on the student assessment literature and then review a research initiative conducted at Mount Royal College on the application of an online assessment tool. The discussion includes an analysis of the merits of the tool from both student and faculty perspectives.

Literature Review

The validity and reliability of student ratings of teaching has been thoroughly analyzed and generally supported in the literature (see Ali and Sell, 1998; Chen and Hoshower, 1998; Cohen, 1980, 1981; Feldman, 1989; Jackson, et al., 1999; Kwan, 1999; Marsh, 1987; Marsh and Roche, 1997; McKone, 1999; Wachtel, 1998; Young and Shaw, 1999). Even with this support there continues to be much debate about if, how, when and in what form students should be allowed to assess their instructors (CAUT, 1998). A review of the vast literature on student assessment of teaching is beyond the limitations of

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[1]An earlier version of this paper was presented at the AAHE's Assessment Conference 2000: "Rising Expectations: Can Assessment Deliver?" June 14-18 in Charlotte, NC. I would like to express my appreciation to Dr. Ken Robson, Dean of Arts, Mount Royal College for his continuing support of this research initiative, Jeny Matthews, University of Calgary, for facilitating the focus groups and Zvjezdan Patz for his programming prowess and jovial attitude.

this paper, however, a look at a few key issues around student's assessment of instructors should prove useful for situating our discussion.[2]

Kam-Por Kwan's (1999) research into student teaching assessments was based on a comparative analysis of 4,996 courses (across 25 departments) at a university in Hong Kong. His findings suggest that there are significant differences in student ratings across academic disciplines (applied languages and design scored highest while applied sciences and engineering scored lowest) and that academic discipline explains about 10% of the total variance in students ratings (Kwan, 1999: 191). Kwan also found that class size accounted for 15% of student rating variations - smaller classes tended to receive higher ratings than larger classes. Although Kwan's research findings are revealing, he notes that his research does not attempt to explain why these differences in student ratings exist. His findings suggest that there are substantive differences in student ratings across academic disciplines and instructional settings but that these are generally outside the instructor's direct control and thus, student assessments should not be used as the sole means for evaluating individual instructional abilities (Kwan, 1999:193).

Yining Chen and Leon B. Hoshower (1998) applied expectancy theory to an investigation of the factors motivating students to participate in the teaching evaluation process. They found that students felt that the most attractive outcome of teaching assessments was to improve teaching. Students were also motivated to participate if they believed their comments would be used to improve the course curriculum or if other students were going to see their comments. From the student's perspective the least important use for teaching assessments was for a teacher's tenure, promotion or salary increments (Chen and Hoshower, 1998). Their research also confirmed that student's motivation to participate in teaching assessments improved if students felt they were being asked to provide meaningful feedback and that it would be acted upon. Chen and Hoshower's work is useful for revealing why students may, or may not, participate in completing a teaching assessment. Faculty's perspective on student's teaching assessments is quite different however.

Faculty concerns about student assessments of their teaching generally fall into three camps. First, some argue that because teaching is a personal endeavour that is influenced by one's personality and beyond the ability of standardized forms to assess in any meaningful way (see CAUT, 1998; Ornstein, 1990). Second, because teaching evaluations are standardized, faculty may be less motivated to experiment in their instructional methods (Centra, 1993). The fact that some faculty may *teach to the evaluation* reduces faculty morale and job satisfaction and may be at odds with good educational practice (Wachtel, 1998). Third, the use of anonymous student assessments of teaching suggests that students can *vent off steam* without ramifications or accountability (Marlin, 1987 as cited in Wachtel, 1998:204; see also CAUT, 1998).

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[2] For excellent reviews of the research into student's assessment of teaching, see Ali and Sell, 1998; Wachtel, 1998; Young & Shaw, 1999.

Given these concerns there is clearly more work to be done to make student assessments of teaching a more friendly and constructive mechanism for improving teaching. An ideal student assessment tool would allow students and instructors the ability to benefit from ongoing feedback (see McKone, 1999:407) in an atmosphere unsullied from faculty's concerns around tenure processes and salary decisions (see Chen & Hoshower, 1998). The following research was intended to address the limitations of traditional student assessments as well as to assess the effectiveness of an independent, faculty-administered online tool allowing teachers to benefit from anonymous student input without formal summative repercussions.

Anonymous Online Assessment Pilot Research

In January 2000, five instructors from Mount Royal College volunteered to participate in a study investigating the usefulness of an anonymous online faculty-administered course/teacher assessment form. The faculty, and the courses they selected for study, was a diverse group that provided a unique opportunity to evaluate the online assessment software from a cross-disciplinary perspective (see Table 1).

Table 1. Discipline/Class Participants

Discipline	Class	Number of Students
Biology	Introduction to Biology (first year)	49
Interior Design	Computer Drafting (second year)	40
Physics	Classical Physics II (first year)	31
Sociology	Introduction to Sociology (first year)	33
Theatre	Theatre Research (first year)	16

Faculty were required to attend 2 one-hour focus group discussions (in February and April[3]) as well as volunteer one of their classes to use the online assessment. Once the classes were selected they were visited to provide students with an overview of the research and to answer any questions. All students wishing to participate were required to sign consent forms reiterating the parameters and purpose of the research. While all students in the class were able to complete the anonymous assessment, random selections of 5 students from each class were asked to participate in the focus groups. No financial remuneration for participating in the focus groups was provided to students or faculty. The total number of focus group participants was 30 (i.e., 5 faculty and 25 students).

All focus group discussions were guided by, but not limited to, answering the following 3 questions:

1. Was the assessment tool easy to use?
2. Were the results from the assessment useful for improving teaching?
3. Did using the assessment tool inspire faculty and students to view the course and/or teaching from a new perspective?

[3] Conducting focus group discussion at the beginning of the course and at the end allows an investigation of how the assessment tool was used over the course and what, if any, influence it had on learning and teaching.

Attendance in the February focus groups was 100% for both students and faculty. This is extraordinary when one considers that these meetings were held outside of class time and required coordinating 5 people's busy schedules. The April sessions included 100% attendance for faculty and 60% for students (for an overall attendance rate of 83%). Students attending the second series of sessions highlighted the fact that the meetings were scheduled immediately before exams and that this may have accounted for the lower attendance.

To determine the usefulness of the online assessment from both faculty and student perspectives, a brief review of the quantitative and qualitative results from the pilot project should prove useful.

Quantitative Results

One criterion to determine if the online tool was useful would be the number of assessments students submitted.

Table 2. Quantitative Results

Discipline	Students	Number of Assessments[4]				Total	Class[5]
		1	2	3	4		
Biology	49	24	5			29	59%
Interior Design	40	4	1			5	13%
Physics	31	12	2	2		16	52%
Sociology	33	13	5	1		19	58%
Theatre	16	6	1	1	1	9	56%
Total	169	59	14	4	1	78	48%

Table 2 summarizes the number of online assessments students submitted. One would predict, given Chen and Hoshower's (1998) research indicating that students are more motivated to participate in teaching evaluations when the results are intended to improve teaching, that students would be highly motivated to complete the survey. This is based on the fact that in the pilot the instructors were only using the assessment's results to improve their teaching - there were no tenure/pay raise implications. However, aggregate results show that fewer than 35% of students (i.e., 59/169) completed the online assessment at least once during the term. Although this appears to challenge Chen and Hoshower's findings, focus group discussions revealed some compelling reasons why students did not submit more assessments.

Qualitative Results

Interpreting the relatively low numbers of assessments students submitted highlights two interesting findings from this research, *Student's Approach to Teaching Assessment* and faculty's *Numerical Fixation*.

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[4] On the survey, each student was asked to indicate how many times he or she had submitted an assessment (i.e., 1-4 times).

[5] Since the software is anonymous these percentages are illustrative only and may not accurately reflect the proportion of students who submitted an assessment.

Student's Approach to Teaching Assessment
During the focus groups students were quick to point out that they liked their teachers and thought they were doing a good job. The facilitator's final report suggests that students expressed the belief that if they were content with their teacher's performance, there was no reason to complete the survey. Therefore, the lack of student participation may be an indication that the teacher was doing a good job, not the reverse.

The Interior Design instructor, for example, who had the lowest number/proportion of assessments submitted, was clearly adored by her students as demonstrated in the focus groups. When the facilitator asked her students why they were not submitting more assessments, the students said they liked the course and that if they had concerns they felt they could approach her directly and "tell her to her face". For this class then, students felt they were receiving quality instruction and did not feel they needed to complete an assessment.

Numerical Fixation
As faculty, our fixation on numbers (i.e., we attributed good teaching with the number of assessments submitted, or as we referred to them, "hits") was evident during our focus group discussions as well as our informal meetings in the halls. In the focus group some faculty expressed that they did not know why their students were not submitting more assessments. As discussed above, faculty were equating the number of assessments with their teaching performance and this interpretation may have been misguided.

These qualitative findings add support for the position that even though student participation rates were low, that this should not diminish the value of providing the students with access to the tool. One student mentioned that even though she had not completed the online assessment, "it was nice to know that it was there".

To review the results of the focus groups, and their discussions of the online assessment tool and its influence on teaching, a summary of the positive and negative impressions from both student and faculty perspectives should prove valuable.

Student Impressions (positive):
Students felt that using the online assessment was a positive experience in a number of ways.

First, students found the assessment tool easy to use and straightforward to understand. The assessment was easy to find because it was linked directly from the course's web-page. Students stated that navigating to the survey, completing and submitting it, was a clear and straightforward process.

Second, students liked that the survey was anonymous. Some students in the focus groups mentioned that when completing print-based assessments they were conscious of whether or not the instructor could attribute individual comments to them. This finding supports the potential value of using an anonymous online teaching assessment (see Feldman, 1979; Blunt, 1991; CAUT, 1998 on issues surrounding student anonymity).

Third, students enjoyed commenting on a class while they were still in it. Students highlighted that commenting on their course during the term was a better assessment strategy than were traditional assessments conducted at the end of the class. While students acknowledged the need for more formal evaluations (i.e., those conducted by the administration), they were unsure if their comments on these assessments ever went anywhere, and if they did, that the resulting changes would never benefit them. This reinforces the position taken by McKone (1999:407) who recommends that instructors establish mechanisms for ongoing feedback to students throughout the term.

Fourth, students liked having the tool available even if they did not use it. As mentioned earlier, students felt that having the option of completing the assessment was important even if they chose not to submit one.

Fifth, students felt that the online assessment allowed them to offer more thoughtful comments than did the traditional, in-class, print-based teaching evaluations. Because the online form is available 24 hours a day students could complete them when they wanted to, not when they had to. Students suggested that the in-class assessments did not allow them the flexibility that the online version did.

Sixth, students appreciated knowing that their teacher wanted to improve their teaching and/or their course. Students commented that they liked knowing that their teacher wanted to improve and that this made them appear more human and approachable.

Student Impressions (areas for improvement/concern):
Students felt that using the online assessment had some drawbacks. These criticisms focused on 4 issues.

First, students were concerned about access to computers. Some students pointed out that access to the survey was limited to those students who had computers at home even though Mount Royal College provides student's with access to computers that are available at various times and locations. When questioned about this, students suggested that the computers at school were slow and that lab times were not always convenient.

Second, some students had difficulty remembering the password. Passwords for the software were presented in class but students said that it was often inconvenient for them to find the password when they wanted to submit an assessment.

Third, some students questioned if their teacher looked at the assessments. Some focus groups suggested that their instructor rarely, if ever, discussed the results of the surveys in class. This criticism however, was not true of all instructors and the majority of focus groups said that their instructor did refer to the survey in class.

Fourth, students reinforced that the questions needed to be changed so they remained current and pertinent. The software available during the pilot research did not allow the instructor to change/edit questions during the term. By default then, the questions focused on the entire course and as such, student comments may not have changed much from one point in the course to the next.

Faculty Impressions (positive):
Faculty suggested that there were some clear benefits to participating in the pilot research itself and using the online assessment tool.

First, faculty enjoyed participating in an open dialogue about teaching with their colleagues. Although all participating faculty had vast teaching experience they mentioned how rarely they actually discussed teaching. Even though focus group sessions were dedicated at assessing the use of the online tool, discussions often transcended the software and became a lively and invigorating discussion about teaching and learning. Faculty expressed that these discussions were among the most beneficial aspects of participating in the pilot research.

Second, the assessment tool made teaching a more reflective process. In fact, one faculty member suggested that because the online assessment tool was available to students 24 hours a day, every day, he found himself being more prepared for class. He saw this as a good thing and that knowing he could be assessed after every class made him more conscious of his teaching and how he might try to improve.

Third, the results from the assessments helped the teacher address student concerns in a proactive and constructive manner. For those faculty who discussed the results from the assessment with their classes (3 of 5) suggested that addressing student concerns in this way allowed them to respond in a more thoughtful manner. Instead of responding to student concerns *on their feet* instructors could reflect on the online comments and then raise the issue/concern with the rest of the class when they were prepared. Once in class, the instructor could ask the students if the concern raised online was important to them as well, and if it was, how the teacher planned (or didn't plan) to address it.

Fourth, the assessment tool allowed faculty to demonstrate that they *practiced what they preached*. One faculty member mentioned that the online tool allowed him to reinforce his belief that all teachers, he included, had much to learn from his student's honest and sincere criticism. He also suggested that as teachers we continually provide students with feedback on their performance (i.e., comments on tests, papers, etc.,) but that we rarely give ourselves the same opportunity for improvement. The online assessment allowed faculty to reinforce their desire to become better teachers through an active dialogue with their students.

Faculty Impressions (areas for improvement/concern):
Faculty did not voice any damning criticisms of the online assessment initiative but did offer some specific comments on how the software could be improved, and some general reflections on changing the existing teaching assessment culture.

First, to be an effective and proactive tool for improving teaching the online software must allow the instructor to alter their questions when they want. Comments gained from static questions do not allow the student or the instructor the benefit to assess the changing needs in the classroom. Questions need to be dynamic in order to inspire students to submit the assessment more than once, and more responsive to individual

courses so that they can account for individual course needs (i.e., questions about labs vs. lectures, guest presentations vs. field trips, etc.)

Second, faculty should not associate the number of assessments with their popularity and/or teaching ability. As mentioned previously, future users of the software must realize that the number of assessments does not necessarily correspond to how well, or how poorly, they are doing. Faculty reinforced the belief that the online assessment should be only one of many vehicles the instructor should use to determine how the students are doing in the class and when changes to delivery or curricula are required.

Third, faculty should continually reinforce the availability of the assessment tool in class. Two of the 5 faculty stated that they should have referred to and reinforced the availability of the tool in class. Both said that this was not necessarily to get more *hits* per sé, but to let students know that they wanted to hear their comments on how they could improve their teaching and the course.

Fourth, faculty said they wanted to change the teaching assessment culture for students and faculty. Faculty stated that both our students and our colleagues need to reflect more on the teaching assessment process and by doing so, change the assessment culture to one that is more dynamic and constructive. On the one hand, students need to understand that their instructors can benefit from hearing negative, constructive criticisms, as well as hearing that they enjoy the course and look forward to coming to class. On the other hand, faculty need to appreciate the wealth of knowledge that our students have about teaching and that we should allow ourselves to benefit from it. Teaching assessments need not inspire hostility and cynicism among faculty but instead be seen as one vehicle by which we can improve the classroom for both the student and the teacher.

Analysis and Discussion

Given the previous review, a return to the pilot's research questions is necessary to determine the value of the online assessment tool.

1. Did students and faculty find the software easy to use?

Yes, students found that the online assessment was easy to complete and submit. Faculty found the tool easy to use and the software's reporting features excellent.

2. Were the results from the assessment useful for improving teaching?

Partly. Although more research on how the online assessment tool influences teaching is required, preliminary results indicate that the ongoing feedback the tool provides to instructors may be invaluable for refining teaching techniques and/or curricula.

3. Did using the assessment tool inspire faculty and students to view the course and/or teaching from a new perspective?

Potentially. For 3 of the 5 faculty the results from the online assessments were discussed in class. For them, this level of classroom discussion about teaching was a novel and

unique experience. Faculty comments indicate that they felt this was a useful mechanism for interacting with their students about their teaching philosophy and their goals for the course. Students in these classes mentioned that when the instructor opened the discussion about their teaching that it made them feel more involved in the teaching and learning process. Although more research is required, it appears that when instructors used the results from the assessment tool and discussed them with their students, they were rewarded by increased instructor/student interaction.

Although the anonymous online assessment software is in its infancy the tool holds great promise for allowing instructors to benefit from student comments during the course. Certainly, more work needs to be done, but so far, the benefits of the software far outweigh its cost in time and effort.[6]

[6] There are no costs for instructors to use this software. The software is available at: http://zpatz.mtroyal.ab.ca/fast/

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